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SUBJECT: HESSE MINISTER-PRESIDENT ROLAND KOCH: POLARIZING, INFLUENTIAL, AMBITIOUS, CHANCELLOR CANDIDATE FOR 2006?

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1. (SBU) Summary: Hesse's Minister President Roland Koch (Christian Democratic Union - CDU), is the most prominent state politician in the CDU and is a strong leader of his party's conservative wing. He is a potential CDU chancellor candidate in 2006. If the CDU-FDP coalition wins state elections on February 2, and especially if his party wins an absolute majority, his influence will expand even more. Koch is ambitious, controversial and polarizing. After surviving a major party financing scandal in 2000, he is now stronger than ever. Koch is pro-U.S. and has been bold in speaking out on international issues. His four years as Minister-President have been successful: he has focused on economic growth, crime reduction and improving education. Koch is a strategic thinker who will certainly leave his mark on CDU policy in the future. End summary.

Roland Koch - Conservative, Influential, Polarizing

2. (SBU) Roland Koch is aggressive, confident, energetic and ambitious. He is a gifted public speaker, who works tirelessly to promote the interests of the CDU, speaking around the state and nationally and appearing frequently in the media. Many voters and the media also find him controversial and polarizing. Other CDU contacts have described him as "not likeable," "arrogant," and "a tough power player to the core." German newspapers have described him as: "The Shadow Chairman" (Spiegel, July 2002); "Hardliner without Humor" (Rheinpfalz, January 2002); and a "politician of extremes" (Badische Zeitung, November 2002). At a press conference in 2000, Koch used the vernacular Hessian expression "brutalstmoeiglich" (literally "as brutal as possible," but meaning "straightforward"), which critics use to label him as ruthless, and admirers to show he is tough and aggressive. His surprise victory in the Hesse state elections in 1999 was largely attributed to his party's campaign against dual citizenship. Though it worked, many perceived Koch's actions as a callous exploitation of visceral anti-immigrant sentiment.

3. (SBU) Even Koch's admirers say his power politics are harsh. His early backing of CDU Chancellor candidate Edmund Stoiber over Angela Merkel for the September 2002 national elections was heavy handed and said to have caused frosty relations with Merkel for months. A fellow Minister-President, quoted anonymously in the Stuttgarter Zeitung, described Roland Koch's role in the CDU: "Merkel has the official power, but Koch pulls the strings." Koch survived a major party financing scandal in 2000, though it brought him close to resignation. His survival skills have earned him respect from the conservative wing of the CDU but the moniker "Teflon man" from critics.

Koch and Hesse: Goals and Achievements

4. (SBU) As a conservative, Roland Koch is a bit of an anomaly for Hesse, a traditionally liberal state led by Social Democrats for decades. Koch claims that his biggest achievement has been making the political climate in Hesse more conservative. Koch's mentor in politics was Alfred Dregger, who dominated Hesse's CDU in the 1970s and 80s. Dregger is credited with increasing CDU voter support in Hesse from 30 percent in the 1970s to above 40 percent today. Koch's major themes and achievements as Minister-President reflect this conservative tradition:

- "Competition and Excellence." (Koch encouraged university reform, added 2900 new teachers to Hesse schools, changed the curriculum to make subjects such as mathematics and German obligatory, and helped create a new school for gifted students.)
- "Safety and Control." (Koch hired more policemen; created a volunteer police force, the "Hilfspolizisten" who receive six weeks' training; presided over a reduction in the crime rate; and facilitated the purchase of new police vehicles.)
- "A pragmatic economic policy." (Koch has been very outspoken on economic issues, vigorously supported Frankfurt

airport expansion, supported biotechnology and nuclear energy, and expanded the state's road infrastructure.)

15. (SBU) Koch has indeed pushed hard to improve economic growth in Hesse and has a "natural talent for economic policy" according to his Chief of Staff. He has used his influence on the board of Fraport (Frankfurt's Airport Authority) to promote Frankfurt airport expansion, adding a fourth runway and a new terminal. He also made national headlines in 2001-2002 with social and labor market issues. His welfare reform initiative, inspired by Wisconsin's, was held up by the Bundesrat, though some of the ideas are now incorporated in the labor reform bill known as the "Hartz Paper." Koch is an idea man, and his State Chancellery has been described as a "huge think tank" exploring social and labor market reform, internal security and Frankfurt's role in a globalized world.

Koch's Style: Energetic, Impatient, Detail-Oriented

16. (SBU) Koch has a keen mind, is detail-oriented, absorbs information quickly, and is said to "devour files" often until late in the evening. In general, he is a strategic thinker, looking to the future and seeing the larger context for issues. His former Chief of Staff Helmut Mueller told us that Koch often thinks like a "lawyer with economics training," rejecting concepts that are not legally or economically sound. He has a well-deserved reputation for structuring his work to keep the goal in sight. He keeps himself well informed on a variety of issues including military affairs, economics and foreign policy, through his staff, his personal reading, and enthusiastic use of the Internet. Koch surrounds himself with dedicated, hard working people, who must keep up with his long hours and hectic pace. He is sometimes very spontaneous, getting an idea from a phone call, for example, then tasking his staff -- even on weekends -- to implement it. Koch's Chief of Staff Thomas Schaefer and others tell us Koch has "endless meetings" to discuss issues and air views, sometimes putting his team members on the spot, pointing at them and asking them for an honest opinion. Koch likes to hear as many opinions as possible before making a decision. He does not like "yes men." Koch enjoys having well-educated people around him -- both his present and former Chiefs of Staff have PhDs -- and routinely consults subject matter experts.

17. (SBU) Once Koch has made up his mind, he can be impatient for results and determined to push forward, reacting harshly to criticism or dissent. Hesse FDP General Secretary Heino Swyter said Koch's strong personality tends to dominate state politics because "almost nobody in the cabinet dares to oppose his views." Swyter describes FDP Chair and Science Minister Ruth Wagner as the only one "who dares to criticize Koch during cabinet sessions." Contacts in the Social Ministry are still frosted by the fact that Koch circumvented them in late 2001, grabbing the issue of family policy and making bold public announcements while ignoring Social Ministry experts. Koch was apparently frustrated when told of the difficulties of transferring a U.S.-style welfare reform program such as "Wisconsin Works" into Germany's vastly different labor and social welfare structure. (The resignation of his Social Minister Marlies Mosiek-Urban in 2001 was partly attributed to this disagreement.) In another example, Koch had the State Chancellery hire well-known social policy expert Judge Borchert to chair a reform commission. Borchert submitted a report with recommendations, but Koch and Judge Borchert did not see eye-to-eye. When Koch cherry-picked only the ideas he liked, Borchert told us he "was disappointed with Koch and happy to go back to his old job."

18. (SBU) Koch is energetic and dynamic and has an abundance of ideas, though when he sees that momentum for a project is lost or the strategic moment for it has passed, he will move on. Some observers have viewed this as "dropping most of his great ideas halfway to realization." Others see it as Koch prioritizing for maximum positive impact of his policy initiatives. Koch's dynamism is also shown in his mastery of material and ability to speak substantively and at length without notes. He is impressive rhetorically and appears frequently in the media. He has a lot of charisma, knows how to get applause, and loves the spotlight.

Koch's Foreign Policy: Pro-U.S.

19. (SBU) Koch is very pro-U.S. and has loudly criticized the damage done to the bilateral relationship by Chancellor Schroeder. Koch has an active interest in U.S. politics and policies. He traveled to the U.S. in 1992 on an International Visitors Program and in 1996 to observe the presidential election campaign. He has also visited the U.S. several times privately. Koch has been supportive of the U.S. military in Hesse and has helped the Consulate with the purchase of a large piece of property in Frankfurt.

Koch considers himself a friend of HHS Secretary and former Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson and gave him one of the highest awards from the state. He even had his staff call the Consulate in a frenzy one day to get Thompson's phone number to wish him a happy birthday.

110. (SBU) Koch is candid with U.S. officials. For example, Koch told the Consul General that the CDU faced a strategic choice on Iraq. If the CDU were to appeal to those who are anti-war, it could win a few votes, but would harm the party in the long run and solidify Chancellor Schroeder's position. The CDU must firmly support the U.S. position, he concluded, and has gone forward in all his campaign speeches with that line. Koch has also gone further on Iraq than most other German politicians, stating he would support military action in Iraq even without the backing of a UN Security Council resolution. On terrorism, Koch has repeatedly emphasized the need to prepare for a terrorist attack, and has held well-attended seminars on internal security and public safety.

111. (SBU) Koch had spoken out against Turkey's entry into the EU. Again, he goes further than most CDU politicians by not only pointing out Turkey's economic and human rights problems, but stating that Europe's Christian traditions would make Turkey the odd man out. Koch has suggested Turkey needs a kind of "Marshall Plan" to build up its economic strength. Koch has traveled to Asia and, like many German leaders, sees China as a vital, growing market for German goods and investment. Koch also has a strong interest in Tibet and frequently visits websites of Tibetan exile groups.

Other Biographic Information

112. (SBU) Koch was born on March 3, 1958. He is the son of former Hesse Justice Minister Karl-Heinz Koch (CDU) and, like his father, started his career as a lawyer in private practice in Eschborn after studying law in Frankfurt. At the age of 14, Koch established a CDU youth group in his hometown of Eschborn. He was elected to Eschborn city parliament in 1977, and then to the Main-Taunus county parliament. From 1979 - 1990 he was District Chairman of the Main-Taunus CDU. From 1983-87 he was also Deputy Party Chairman of the national "Junge Union," the youth wing of the CDU. In 1987, he was elected to the Hesse state parliament and in 1990 became CDU caucus chairman. In 1998, he took over the state party chairmanship from his mentor, Manfred Kanther and was elected to the 40-member national CDU Executive Committee. Koch speaks excellent English. True to his name (Koch means cook), he is a talented cook and enjoys Cajun cuisine. Koch is married and has two children.

COMMENT: Koch's Star will Rise

113. (SBU) Roland Koch is one of the most prominent state politicians in the CDU and a strong leader of his party's conservative wing. Koch's closest aides and staff are unanimous about Koch's national ambitions and the media have described him at recent conventions as "already rehearsing for Chancellor in 2006." Speculation that Koch would leave politics if he lost the Hesse state elections on February 2 is "absolute nonsense," according to Hesse CDU Parliamentary Manager Stefan Gruettner. Koch, already a force to reckon with in the CDU, will gain even more influence nationally if he wins an absolute majority for the CDU, which opinion polls say is within reach. Koch may want to put more of his ideas in the CDU's national platform, in order to give it a "dynamic conservative" spin, as he likes to say. Should Koch lose the state elections (if the CDU's coalition partner, the FDP, fails to gain the 5 percent necessary to enter parliament), it may slow Koch down, but certainly not end the career of a man involved in politics since the age of fourteen. End comment.

114. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.

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